

REVIEW: *FAITH AND EMPIRE: ART AND POLITICS IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM* BY KARL DEBRECZENY

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Karl Debreczeny (ed). 2019. *Faith and Empire: Art and Politics in Tibetan Buddhism*. New York: Rubin Museum of Art. 272pp. ISBN-10:0692194606 (hardcover 50.28USD).

The aims of the spectacular *Faith and Empire* exhibition at the Rubin Museum of Art¹ and its admirable catalog are "to reground Tibetan Buddhist art in its historical and global context and highlight a dynamic aspect of the tradition related to power, one that may run counter to popular perceptions, yet one that is critical to understanding this tradition's importance on the world stage" (19). Tibetan Buddhist art serves as "both an active agent and primary medium of government propaganda." While "faith was a path to legitimation and a means to power . . . rituals were potential weapons of war and . . . art a conduit" (19). The catalog's essays and the exhibition on which it is based were designed as a corrective to "romanticized projections born from colonial encounters" that tend to separate Buddhism from politics when in fact they have often been inseparable and symbiotic, particularly in Tibet (19). The catalog features Tibetan Buddhism's catalytic role in Tibet and at the courts of the Tangut, Mongol-Yuan, Ming, and Manchu-Qing in:

claiming power, both symbolic and literal. ... The objective here is not to suggest that the Mongolian, Chinese, or Manchu empires were idealized Buddhist kingdoms but rather that the deployment of religious rhetoric

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¹ Full disclosure: Between 2004 and 2006 I was the inaugural curator at the Rubin Museum and in 2014, I curated an exhibition at Northwestern University's Block Museum of Art that traveled to the Rubin Museum as its second venue.

was central to their respective claims to legitimacy, with religious rituals being one of several means to establish and maintain power (48).

Karl Debreczeny, the organizing curator of the exhibition and the catalog's editor, has gathered the threads of a great deal of scholarship on the history, religion, and art of Tibetans, Tanguts, Mongols, and Manchus and designed a continuous narrative over the ten chapters of the catalog that he and eight other authors weave. The scope is sweeping and the pace rapid: from the seventh century to the nineteenth, from northern India to Mongolia, from Bihar to Beijing, in less than 275 pages. The exhibition was exhilarating, filled as it was with superb examples of painting, sculptures, books, metalwork, and textiles from varied collections.

The catalog is also generously outfitted with wonderful full-page illustrations, overall photographs, and satisfying details of works that were included in the exhibition, as well as others that were not. They are distributed within chapters written by some leading scholars of religious studies, political history, and art history, including American, Chinese, European, and Tibetan authors. To extend the "weaving" metaphor, in the catalog, the art is often submerged as the invisible underlying structure, the warp threads on which the historical and religious wefts are wrapped-cited but not always discussed. It is the price paid for interdisciplinary scholarship, and we can be grateful that non-art historians provide succinct and fascinating discussions of periods and movements that produced the featured art. Nevertheless, in a few of the essays, the warps rise to the surface and are illuminated, predictably, most often in the chapters by the three art historians (Debreczeny, Xie, and Chou).

Early on, themes are introduced that will be later elaborated in chapters. The introduction by Debreczeny, "Faith and Empire: An Overview" begins one of these topics, the "internationalism" of the Tibetan empire. Its holdings in Central Asia, especially at Dunhuang, and the images of Tibetan kings and notions of Buddhism's bestowal of "divine sanction" and "sacrosanct rulership" (24) are the most pertinent. Tantric teachings promoting "magical warfare," were

accepted early on and are here exemplified with the capsule biography of the twelfth century Lama Shang Tsöndru Drakpa, illustrated by a portrait sculpture from the Jacques Marchais Museum, an example of a work that is never discussed for its own sake. The Tangut Xia ("Xixia") kingdom is introduced as well as its prefiguring of Mongol engagement with Tibetan Buddhism. The Mongol-Yuan rulers, their Tibetan preceptors, and the role of Mahākāla as weaponized state protector are presented, and they all seem to reappear in most of the later chapters. The Nepalese artist Anige (1244-1306), one of three named artists to whom examples are attributed (with the late seventeenth- to early eighteenth-century Zhanabazar and the fifteenth-century Khyentsé Chenmo), is singled out for individual attention.

Here and in his chapter on Tibetan Buddhist art produced during the Ming Dynasty, Debreczeny gives admirable attention to book production and printing. Instead of isolating them into a separate category, the author integrates them into discussions of painting, sculpture, and architecture. A few ceramics and lacquers are also welcome additions in the Ming and Qing chapters, along with textiles which are featured in several of the essays.

Religious historian Ronald M Davidson provides a wide-ranging and learned discussion of early texts related to "Indic Roots of Political Imagery and *Imaginaire*." He addresses two different Indic models of Buddhist divine kingship, one found in a fragmented story of the *cakravartin* in Sanskrit and Tibetan (but not Chinese) versions of the *Lalitavistara*¹ and the other in diverse early sources on "the myth of "Mahāsammata, the lawgiver who represents a mythological

¹ Davidson relates the *Lalitavistara* discussion of the seven treasures of the *cakravartin* to two fifteenth-century Ming embroideries that depict them. Unfortunately, the description does not always match the images. There is clearly a kneeling official holding a tablet in the upper left in the detail on p. 55, and an armored warrior with a shield and sword at the bottom center. Instead, the textual description calls for a "citizen" and a "minister." The "minister" should relate to the official but Donaldson identifies the image of the warrior as minister and the image of the kneeling official as the "citizen." By Ming times - and even earlier - the seven treasures had evolved to including the "wise general" instead of a "citizen."

refurbishment of the old Indian republics' selection of their leaders" (57). Davidson then discusses "Tantric Buddhist Kingship" in the form of *vidhyādhara* and the elevation of wrathful deities before turning to Tibetan incorporations of Indic Buddhist ideas into Tibetan indigenous traditions of kingship. He insightfully compares the "Tibetan and Central Asian understanding of a military hero who also stands as the chief priest ... [a]s much shaman and magician as hero, warrior, and astute politician" (64), advisor to the Indian Buddhist monarch described as "son of the gods (*devaputra*) because he suppresses evil beings and follows the Dharma" (65).

Donaldson briefly considers the gradual Buddhicization of the Tibetan imperial legends beginning in the tenth or eleventh century. This segues nicely with Buddhologist Brandon Dotson's Chapter 3, "The Emanated Emperor and His Cosmopolitan Contradictions." Dotson outlines the "centuries-long process" by which the three kings of seventh to ninth century imperial Tibet were transformed into Buddhist kings and emanations of Bodhisattvas and Buddhas, "one of the central founding myths of Tibetan Buddhism" (72). This equation, in turn, helps justify depictions of Buddhas wearing Tibetan-style royal robes and boots, such as the Pritzker Vairocana (Fig 3.4). Dotson also delineates the early Tibetan kings' "Central Eurasian cosmopolitanism" by staging the royal hunt as "a spectacular form of royal theater." The gilt silver rhytons and beakers enjoyed at the Tibetan court were "gifts from foreign dignitaries [or] the work of Sogdian, Persian, Chinese, Turk, or Tibetan artisans employed by the Tibetan court" (76). Three such vessels, possibly eighth century, from the Cleveland Museum of Art, were featured in the exhibition and the catalog and related by Dotson to banqueting scenes described in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*.

The period between the ninth century collapse of the Tibetan Puryal Dynasty and the use of Tibetan Buddhism and its art at the Tangut Xia court in the twelfth century is a gap that might have been filled with a chapter relating to the formation of the so-called Purang-Guge Kingdom in the western Himalayas. The latter's royal lamas, such as Yeshe Ö, were devoted patrons who were involved in founding

important temples in Tholing and Tabo. Admittedly, there has been considerable work done on this area, including by the Rubin Museum, but the absence in this context highlights the emphasis in this exhibition and catalog on Central Tibet and its connections with Tanguts, Mongols, and Manchus to the north and east.

The prominent Chinese scholar of Tibetan and Tibet-related Chinese art, Xie Jisheng, contributed a chapter to the catalog, ably translated by Michelle McCoy. The bulk of the chapter provides extended treatments of four works in the exhibition, two of them textiles (an issue addressed below).¹ In the first section of the chapter, Xie reviews a history of the Tangut kingdom (1038-1226), precariously posed between northeast Tibet and northwest China (its capital in what is now Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region), and its Buddhist relations with Central Tibet. Xie reiterates his theory - still intriguing, still controversial - that Dunhuang Cave 465 is from the Tangut period of control over the Dunhuang region rather than the Mongol Yuan period as usually assumed.² Xie makes clear that despite the interaction at different levels - artistic, technical, iconographic, and doctrinal - Tangut art "followed its own developmental path" (88).

The inclusion of a chapter, shortened, edited, and translated into English by a learned Tibetan is admirable for its own sake. "Tibetan Buddhism and Art in the Mongol Empire According to Tibetan Sources," the fifth chapter, is by the deputy director and chief curator of a private museum in Chengdu, Tsangwang Gendun Tenpa.

¹ The use of long-rejected term "Dhyāni" Buddha as it appears on pages 94 and 96 in the translation by Zhu Runxiao of Xie Jisheng's entry on the Cleveland's *kesi* (Fig 4.7) calls out for correction. Certain unsupported, questionable iconographic classifications are also made, such as identifying the blue Vighnāntaka, the central figure in the Cleveland *kesi*, as Trailokyavijaya (who, to my knowledge, is not, "interchangeable" with Acala as the text states). Also mistaken is the statement that he tramples Parvatī and Gaṇeśa [97]. While the Hindu Gaṇeśa (who is missing one tusk) is arguably closely related to the Buddhist Vināyaka (usually, as here, with two complete tusks) and is often confused with him, the figure identified as Parvatī is unmistakably Maheśvara. Whether the error derives from the translations or the Chinese original is not indicated.

² For an extended treatment of this argument, see Xie Jisheng (2004:38-45).

He trained as a painter, not a historian, and takes a decidedly textual approach, as the title of the chapter indicates. The occasional lapses from a critical historian's perspective are the price we pay for a welcome distinctive diversity of approaches.¹ In this case, as in other chapters, the works of art are mainly illustrations, not the focus of discussion. Gedun Tenpa does offer specific suggestions for the year in which both the Tibet Museum's Acala and the Met's Vajrabhairava *maṇḍala kesi* were made, based on their Tibetan inscriptions (1210 and 1329, respectively) and the catalog follows that dating in the illustrations' captions, though neither were included in the exhibition.

More than a third of the catalog is devoted to the Chinese Ming and the Manchu Qing dynasties' patronage of Tibetan Buddhism and its art both at home in those dynasties' capitals "for internal court use and as part of complex diplomatic exchanges with Tibetan hierarchs, a projection of what we might today call soft power" (125). Debreczeny's chapter on the Ming is a fresh survey of the principal media undergoing extraordinary refinement in this period, including metalwork; silk embroidery and *kesi* tapestry; painting; porcelain; and book illustration, production, and printing. The "jeweler's precision in ornamentation" (131) of the metalwork has long been recognized,² but the inclusion of the Cernuschi's major work (ht. 136 cm) from Qutansi in Qinghai Province was itself worth the price of admission to the exhibition for fortunate viewers in New York.

Some confusion about textiles (discussed below) creeps into the discussion of the Hevajra silk *embroidery*, the "cover lot," which was also featured prominently in the exhibition. It is not an example of a *woven* silk thangka as is stated (131) though Debreczeny's extensive treatment of the inscription on the back reveals that it was a paradigmatic example of textiles produced in China used as

¹ For example, an anecdote transmitted in a seventeenth-century Tibetan text is accepted as evidence that the Tangut kings provided gifts of weavings to Sakya Monastery in Tibet in the twelfth century (106). Some surprising assertions are passed along as factual such as the claim of an eighteenth-century author that Chinghiz Khan arrived in Tibet in 1206 and ruled it (106).

² See for example, Watt and Leidy (2005).

inducements and rewards for Tibetan religious leaders to travel to China. Debreczeny demonstrates that this exquisite work was made, inscribed, and offered to Shākya Yeshé (d. 1435), most likely at some point after the first of two trips to Nanjing and Beijing in 1415 and 1434, respectively. He also clarifies the origin of the famous *kesi* portrait of Shākya Yeshé in the Tibetan Museum of Lhasa (not in the exhibition) as commissioned in a commercial *kesi* workshop in China by two of the latter's disciples, not an imperially ordered gift as is usually presumed (131-134).

Next, the eminent historian of Tibet and Tibetan literature, Per K Sørensen, offers a conceptual framework for a number of important images of the Fifth Dalai Lama and his prior births. His essay, "Rise of the Dalai Lamas: Political Inheritance through Reincarnation," examines how the ideology of the Dalai Lamas as religious and political rulers tapped into the special relationship conceived between Avalokiteśvara and Tibet, the legends of the founder of the Tibetan dynasty, Songtsen Gampo (ca. 605-649), as well as a growing list of celebrated religious forerunners. The narrative of one coveted sculptural image, the "original" sandalwood Phakpa Lokeśvara (illustrated with a later [distant] "copy" in the exhibition) concisely demonstrates the exhibition's central theme, how "the precious icon became enmeshed in politics" (162), military conflicts, "national" significance and legitimacy, and the decisive role of Mongols in Central Tibet in the seventeenth century.

Bryan J Cuevas' contribution, "The Politics of Magical Warfare," is key for illuminating the central concept of the exhibition. Again, while not dealing specifically with the objects that appear in the chapter, this work by a specialist in Buddhism and Tibetan religion, convincingly explicates the ritual function of themes and genres in Tibetan art that tend to be singled out mainly for their striking aesthetic interest. These include *maṇḍala*, black thangkas, hybrid (theriomorphic) themes (e.g., snake-bodied Rāhula with a human torso, raven-headed and raven-winged Mahākala, buffalo-headed Yama, Yamāri, and Vajrabhairava), the flayed skins of "enemies" pinned by triangular daggers, and the like. So many of the most

intriguing and striking Tibetan works of art are not (merely?) frothy expressions of unconscious fears. They represent aspects of "magical warcraft," employed by a number of the paragons of Buddhism (including Lama Shang and the Fifth Dalai Lama) to destroy very real armies attacking them, or threatening to do so. Cuevas nicely joins an analysis of how "ritualized acts that manipulate hidden links or bonds of macro-and microcosmic correspondences" (172) with translated accounts of the practitioners themselves describing the rituals, their results, and their failures. This is the "dark side," as it were, of Tibetan Buddhism and its art, one at odds with the idealized views of "non-violent" Buddhists and Tibetans, though just as deeply rooted in the historical record. Neither the ethics of this violence nor the audacious rationalization of killing as "liberation" are explored here, but plenty of examples of the regional, clan, ethnic, and sectarian rivalries that provoked the ritualized violence are provided.

Chapter Nine is mainly devoted to the well-studied biographies, activities, and artistic productions of the eighteenth-century Qianlong-era (r. 1736-1795) Qing emperor¹ and his Tibetan Buddhist preceptor Changkya Rolpai Dorjé (1717-1886). Portraits of both abound, and the emperor's, in particular, are both wide-spread (including in monasteries in Central Tibet), and varied.² Because of the connection established in the early Qing period between "Manchu" and "Mañjuśrī," many of the portraits of the Qianlong Emperor depict him with the attributes of the latter but in Tibetan monastic robes, and surrounded by deities and teachers. Wen-shing Chou, an art historian specializing in Tibeto-Chinese art who teaches at Hunter College, competently discusses the "triumvirate at the center of the Buddhist empire," that is, the emperor, his preceptor, and the Sixth Panchen Lama who died of smallpox on his ill-fated visit to Beijing at the invitation of the emperor to celebrate the latter's seventieth birthday.

¹ In the catalog, "Qianlong" is used as the emperor's personal name; the same is occasionally true of "Yongle" in the chapter on the Ming. Properly, these are era names, but for non-specialist audiences, they are increasingly used as if otherwise.

² They are well illustrated in the catalog, but none could be included in the exhibition.

Chou explores the "layering of identities," "playful interchangeability," and "imaginaries" in the production of a purported copy of the Panchen Lama's Tashilhunpo Monastery in the Manchu imperial preserve north of Beijing, in Chengde, in anticipation of the Panchen Lama's visit. Also discussed are memorial shrines prepared afterward, and other related works, including a hollow dry lacquer sculpture, a carved lacquer butter lamp, porcelains, and paintings included in the exhibition. These were produced at the Manchu Qing court with mixed inspiration, one stream of which was certainly Tibetan Buddhist artistic motifs, themes, and conventions.

The final chapter spans the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries and touches on the most varied and extreme forms of Mongol-Tibetan relations. Unexpected stops along the way include Muslim communities in the Qing, the quasi-Christian Taiping Rebellion, Agvan Dorzhiev (1854-1938)-the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's emissary to the Russian Tsar Nicholas II-the White Russian painter Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947), a "Buddha from Space" carved from iron meteorite, and a proposed 177-foot tall Maitreya sculpture in Mongolia, based on a Zanabazar sculpture included in the exhibition. In this final chapter, as dizzying and exhilarating as the exhibition itself, Maitreya and the utopian Buddhist hidden kingdom of Shambhala are the connecting threads. The distinguished historian, Johan Elverskog, is the guide for this final tour-de-force.

The significance of this catalog's contribution to the study of Tibetan Buddhist art lies in its welding of perspectives, genres, disciplines, and regions. Fairly original in this integration of diversity, it avoids the danger of the superficiality of the "survey." In its embrace of this mode in the catalog, it necessarily rejected the traditional format of assessing each work of art with a roughly equivalent degree of scrutiny and explication. As already indicated, the selection of individual examples was superb, but the unusual combination of very high quality and rare examples in an overview format required regrettable neglect of analysis of the details of theme and style of each work. In what follows, inspired by the opportunity to examine in person one of the works in the exhibition, I attempt to offer a mild

critique not of what was done but of a lost opportunity, making legible the costs of choosing one method of documentation over another. Again, what was accomplished in the exhibition and the catalog was original and valuable. What was not done in the catalog, calls out for reconsideration.

However, before getting to that, there is a minor assertion repeatedly appearing in several of the scholarly chapters that calls for reconsideration. In various chapters, it is suggested that early *kesi* with Tibetan Buddhist themes, including one found at Khara Khoto, were produced in the Tangut Xia territory. Already in the introduction, *kesi*, misleadingly translated as "cut silk," is described as "a technique developed in Central Asia and adopted by the Tangut court for the making of Tibetan Buddhist icons" (28). In Chapter Four, on the Buddhist art of the Tangut Xia, we are told that the Tanguts adopted and incorporated the "skills and technologies [of 'Chinese *kesi* textile art'] to create *thangkas*" and then after the dynasty's destruction by the Mongols, "*kesi* *thangka* techniques were transmitted to the Mongol Yuan" (88). Repeated in the fifth chapter, Tsangwang Gendun Tenpa also asserts that the "workmanship" of Acala and the Lama Shang *kesi*, both in the Tibet Museum in Lhasa, are Tangut (105).¹

Note that in these three cases, it is not a matter of the design, but the "technique," the "skills and technologies," or the "workmanship," implying the Tanguts were making these in the Tangut Xia kingdom by and for Tanguts. Where is the *corpus delecti* for this - the evidence for this claim that Tanguts were operating the looms in their territory, instead of sending designs to Chinese weavers in such long-standing centers as Hangzhou for execution, as it seems most likely to me? The only citation for the identification of this group of *kesi* as being produced in the Tangut kingdom is in the introduction, where, in note 34, the catalog for "the groundbreaking exhibition *When Silk Was Gold*" is cited (49). However, as the authors of that catalog acknowledge:

¹ As Debreczeny rightly notes, Gendun Tenpa's dating of these weavings and the attribution to the Tangut kingdom is not universally recognized (49n34).

production of *kesi* in the Tangut Xia ... has been inferred from a passage in a Tangut document relating to official workshops in the Tiansheng reign (1149-1169) of Emperor Renzong. This passage, however, is concerned with both silk weaving and wool weaving and is not explicit in reference to *kesi*. Far more compelling evidence for the production of *kesi* seems to be provided by actual examples, some woven with pearls, that are of great technical expertise and are closely related stylistically and iconographically to Tangut art.¹

If the only real evidence for the Tangut provenance of these weavings is their resemblance to Tangut paintings in style and iconography, that is not sufficient when dealing with a media that was inherently transmedial. It is a familiar characteristic of *kesi* that it reproduces paintings and calligraphic scrolls with such fidelity that the woven product appears to be a brushed painting or scroll. Given a sufficiently detailed cartoon, Song and Yuan weavers could reproduce Song album leaves, bird-and-flower paintings, ink landscapes, and poems by Northern Song calligraphers,² or for that matter, wrathful deities of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism.

Wardwell and Watt (1997) also refer to a close material relationship between several of the so-called "*kesi* thangka" in terms of a shared distinctive "tangle of long weft threads and by the lengthy ends of numerous broken and replaced warps that cover the reverse side."³ This suggests that they originated from the same workshop. Yet they acknowledge that some members of the group with Tibetan-style designs do not share those characteristics and that the Met's Yuan Dynasty Vajrabhairava maṇḍala, featured in the Gedun Tenpa chapter

¹ Watt and Wardwell (1997:60).

² See Tunstall (2015), who writes that *kesi* literally means "weft-woven silk" using discontinuous wefts (24). The weaving technique creates the effect of vertical gaps between colors described by another term in use, "slit-tapestry weaving" (not that slits are cut into the fabric). A Song account claims that it takes a whole year to make enough for a woman's robe (34) which, even if exaggerated, suggests a very labor-intensive craft. At any rate, "cut silk" as a translation is unsatisfactory.

³ Watt and Wardwell (1997:60).

of *Faith and Empire*, is finished in the same way. It is difficult to accept that a commission executed more than one hundred years after the destruction of the Tangut Xia Kingdom was produced in a Tangut-run workshop, instead of one of the many operated in Hangzhou or Suzhou and the Bureau for Imperial Manufacture under tight Mongol control. Accordingly, the technical data do not unequivocally support a Tangut Xia production zone, any more than the designs demonstrate an origin at looms within the Tangut kingdom.

Such fine *kesi* required a tremendous amount of the finest silk thread for both warp and weft. Weaving is just the final step in a complex process, from hatching silkworm eggs, reeling raw silk from the cocoons; disentangling, smoothing and twisting (quilling) the silk yarn; and spooling the yarn produced by many households and gathering it to the specialized workshops capable of producing *kesi*. Where is the evidence for either the production of silk in or its importation to, the Xia Kingdom? The single passage from the Tangut Tiansheng regulations referred to above that has been used to support the supposition of weaving workshops at the Tangut court seeks to limit allowable waste and loss during transport and preparation of precious resources, suggesting shortages, not plentitude.¹ As Morris Rossabi in the same *When Silk Was Gold* catalog indicates, after 1004 the Song annually provided the Tanguts with 40,000 bolts of silk, and after the mid-eleventh century, with 153,000 bolts per year.² The Tibetans do not have a distinguished silk weaving industry or tradition - they certainly never produced *kesi* - what is the evidence for the Tanguts having one?

Of course, it is possible that without registering in the surviving historical record, Tangut weavers learned the techniques in eastern China, or that eastern Chinese weavers were induced to come work for the Tanguts, that the looms necessary to produce these ultra-fine weavings were built, and the silk was produced in the Tangut Xia Kingdom or imported at the necessary massive quantities. But until evidence is produced to securely demonstrate that, I find it premature

¹ Ibid, 62n16.

² Ibid, 10.

to assume that there were no commercial workshops in eastern China willing to take Tangut-and Tibetan-commissions for weavings in which they specialized, just as was done later in the century under the Ming, as Debreczeny has shown in relation to the *kesi* portrait of Shākya Yeshé in the Tibetan Museum of Lhasa.¹ Such was also the case as late as the early twentieth century when the well-known set of paintings of the Panchen Lamas with their preincarnations associated with Tashilunpo were woven as tapestries (not *kesi*) with both Tibetan and Chinese inscriptions in Hangzhou. Sets were sent to Geluk monasteries all over the Tibetan cultural sphere. Today, they are found as far west as at Kyi Gumpa in Spiti and Karsha Gumpa in Zangskar, where I have personally documented them in 2006 and 2018, respectively.

Several collections have been very generous in lending their treasures to the exhibition, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Musée des Arts Asiatiques-Guimet in Paris, the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, the New York Public Library, along with a few private collections. A few select, rarely seen works were borrowed for the exhibition from the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, the Harvard Art Museums, the Berkeley Art Museum of the University of California, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Musée Cernuschi, Paris.

One work in particular, only on view in the exhibition for the first month or so because of its fragility and light-sensitivity, is the extraordinary painting from Dunhuang, the cave site in Gansu

¹ Francesca Bray has discussed the complex infrastructure in Hangzhou necessary to produce *kesi* during the Southern Song contemporary with the Tangut period and the early Yuan:

[T]he most valuable silk textiles were produced in state manufactures and increasingly in private urban workshops. ... And the state itself ran the manufactures that produced the most elaborate and valuable silks. These manufactures were run by officials and obtained their raw materials from the silk yarn or raw silk levied in taxes ... Wue Jingshi's handbook on loom construction ... prefaced 1264, describes the construction of various looms ... It makes clear the high cost of construction, the need for skilled maintenance, and the complexity of setting up the loom for weaving (1997:203).

Province of western China. Referred to as the "Deities of the Padmakula Maṇḍala," it is a painting on silk (Fig 3.6). It was recovered from the walled-up Cave 17 in the early twentieth-century and acquired by the Sinologist Paul Pelliot during his expedition of 1906-1908. Now in the Musée des Arts Asiatiques-Guimet, it is generally accepted as having been produced during the period when the Tibetan Puryal empire controlled Dunhuang (ca. 781-848), though the Tibetan impact in terms of religion and language lingered well beyond that. The painting's style and the iconography have prompted much discussion. On the one hand, I agree that it is an example of what Debreczeny calls in the catalog "Tibetan religious and aesthetic interests" (20]. Jane Casey Singer also suggested that it must be "tentatively associated with Tibet" and points to the informal, "irregular arrangement of figures," atypical of Tibetan painting in later centuries, though proposing stylistic parallels with the now destroyed paintings in the Jokhang.¹ Lila Russell-Smith concludes that the painting represents an "Indo-Kashmiri style and can, therefore, be securely linked to the Tibetan period."²

Michael Soymié (1924-2002), who wrote the astute entry for this painting in the French edition of the Guimet Dunhuang catalog notes that the "style of the painting is most worthy of attention," and points to the various hypotheses to explain the character of the painting, including India, Tibeto-Nepalese, Himalayan, or:

originating along the Silk Route. For our part, we have advanced the hypothesis of Indian art of the Pāla dynasty established in Bengal from the middle of the eighth century, under which Tantric Buddhism flourished ... The only thing certain is that this painting has a very marked foreign [i.e., non-Chinese] flavor, the origin of which is surely found in India, through whatever detours.³

¹ Singer (1994:111-112).

² Russell-Smith (2003:415), and also see Russell-Smith (2005:184).

³ Guimet (1995:vol 1:348-349), my translation.

It is not only the painting's style, or more precisely, the origins and appropriate nomenclature for certain of its aspects that is the subject of interesting debates. It was formerly referred to as "Maṇḍala of Amoghapāśa."¹ As Soymié rightly points out, however, the noose (*paśa*) alone is insufficient to identify it as Amoghapāśa.² He advocates for a modified version of Matsumoto Eiichi's 1937 suggestion that it represents a summary of the Lotus section of the Garbhadhātu maṇḍala; rather, he suggests, and several sources including the *Faith and Empire* catalog follow him on this, that it is more closely aligned with Yixing's commentary to the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* (MVS) translated by Śubhakarasiṃha and Yixing. This corresponds fairly well, though not without anomalies, as Soymié acknowledges. We can be most confident that Tārā and four-armed Bhṛkūtī are paired female retinue figures at his shoulders, and that in the lower left corner Hayagrīva appears, with a horse-head emerging from his hair. Two more two-armed female figures are in the upper left and lower corners, diagonally opposite each other, and two more male bodhisattvas, one at the upper right corner, and one four-armed at bottom center. Both male bodhisattvas carry a long-stemmed lotus and may be alternate forms of Avalokiteśvara. Various identities have been offered for the four of them, including by Tanaka Kimiaki.³

What I have to add to the ongoing discourse about this fascinating painting are a few observations that specify the hybrid sources of the painting's details. I would first point out that, although the identity of the central figure as a form of Avalokiteśvara is not in doubt-especially given the seated Amitāyus in his crown, as specified in the MVS-there are a few oddities in his form. The most prominent is his color, which at present is a dark blue or black, with a light blue tinge to the hair visible at the hairline along the lower edge of his crown and his chignon behind the crown. I will return to this in a moment. To date, most attention has been given to the *paśa* 'noose' held in his second proper left hand. His main left hand, however, holds a stick

¹ Singer (1994:112), Stoddard (2008:7).

² Guimet (1995:349).

³ Guimet (1:349).

with three asymmetrical branches, each with a few leaves sprouting from the tip. Except for the leaves, the stick closely resembles the *tridaṇḍa* prescribed for the six-armed form of Avalokiteśvara found in Kashmir and the western Himalayas, Sugatiśaṃdārśana Lokeśvara. This may be one of at least two traits suggestive of Kashmir, though the *tridaṇḍa* is also, though rarely, represented in eastern Indian and Nepali art. In Zangskar, I recently encountered a painting of Sugatiśaṃdārśana Lokeśvara that, like this one, was dark blue, even black, instead of the prescribed skin like the color of a bright moon or conch. Is it possible, as I speculate was the case for the Zangskari painting,¹ that a silver pigment was used at Dunhuang and has tarnished to the point of turning black?

An additional feature that recalls some exposure to Kashmiri art is found in the highly unusual headdresses worn by Tārā and Bhṛkūtī. Their hair is enclosed within open mesh networks of golden cables that twine and curl around each other like tendrils. Intriguing comparisons are descriptions of Kashmiri court women wearing "long garlands formed by their hair-braids into which were [woven] golden Ketaka-leaf [ornaments] ... into the ends of their locks which were not veiled, were twined golden strings."² Although even more distant in date, they closely resemble the painted curling fretwork emerging from *makara*, *kīrtimukha*, and *kalaviṅka* on the walls of the Alchi Sumtsek.³ In the caption to a mural of an enthroned Buddha, Goepper refers to the "rich scroll-work crowning Amitābha's throne... [that] develops as an outgrowth of *kalaviṅka* tails."⁴ This intricate patterning appears above many of the painted figures on the walls of the Alchi Sumtsek. In the Guimet painting, the unusual headdresses seem to be inspired by certain lost sources that survive in later textual and visual forms of jeweled hair and goldsmith-like patterns.

Another trait reflecting a mixed origin, but not Kashmiri, is the asymmetrical earrings of the central figure. The one hanging from his

¹ Linrothe (2018).

² Stein (1900/2007:vol 1:340).

³ Goepper and Poncar (1996:frontispiece and top; 72).

⁴ Ibid, 42.

right earlobe is an elaborate *makara*, while the one on his left is shaped like a hollow barrel or reliquary. Two of the female retinue figures wear earrings nearly identical to the barrel-shaped one, and in most cases, all wear asymmetrical earrings. This and the toe-rings visible on some of the female figures are regularly found in elaborate eastern Indian sculptures from the eighth-century onward but are much less frequent in Kashmiri or western Himalayan art. Overall, in terms of the treatment of the figure, the shape of the eyes, and the type of clothes worn, much recalls eastern India, and with the exceptions mentioned above, almost nothing supporting an attribution to Kashmir.

Another aspect speaks strongly of an origin in eastern Indian religious art as transmitted to Tibet. It is almost invisible in most reproductions, including the one in the catalog. It was, however, clearly visible in the well-lit exhibition. The lower one/seventh of the painting, which appears like a darkened blur in reproductions, is actually finely detailed with a series of evenly placed offering objects on wavy-legged tripod stands. The latter alternate with other ritual objects. From left to right, the objects on tripod stands are: a conch shell, presumably filled with perfume; a brazier with a flame signifying *dīpa* 'lamp'; a wide dish with what appears to be foodstuffs; another bowl filled with flowers, and another conch on the far right. Between the conch on the left and the lamp is a vajra-handled *ghaṇṭā* 'bell' upright on a simple stand, while between the conch on the right and the bowl of flowers is a long handled, self-supporting incense burner. The objects, their stands, and placement, as well as their location at the bottom of the painting, closely follow the models of sculptures and paintings from the eighth to the twelfth century of eastern India, Bihar, Bengal, and Orissa. They appear in both Brahmanical and Buddhist themes, and reflect the long-standing ritual practices associated with images that have roots going back to *śruti* rituals of sacrifice, here implying the presence of both the sponsors and the *vajrācārya* performing *pratisthā* (Tib. *rab gnas*; consecration). In fact the objects align well with the ones that are named as appropriate to use (once the "receptacle" [painting, sculpture, book, *stūpa*, etc.] has been consecrated) within a text by the Tibetan Sakya Jetsün Dragpa

Gyaltsen (1147-1216) in which he explicitly follows patterns transmitted from India: *puṣpa* 'flowers', *dhūpa* 'incense', *dīpa* 'lamps' *gandha* 'perfumes', *naidya* 'foods', *ghaṇṭa* 'music'.¹

Thus, this extraordinary painting registers aspects in its thematics and visuals that trigger associations with two essential sources of Buddhist thought and art (eastern India and Kashmir) through the mediation of Tibetan Buddhists in the Chinese oases of the Dunhuang Mogao Caves. Despite the varied sources of inspiration, despite knowledge of aspects of distinct traditions, the artist has managed to create a work of surprising unity. Only a few small sections betray the fact that the artist is, most likely, neither eastern Indian, Kashmiri, or even Tibetan, but an accomplished artist who was attracted to incorporating aspects of those traditions, but who had a fundamentally linear training and approach in which he (?) worked. This painter of lines could work in the iron-wire line mode of perfectly unmodulated lines of even width - as in the body outlines or those marking the fleshy throats - and in modulated linework of precisely controlled waxing and waning width, as in the eyebrows. Most telling of all, however, is the loose brushwork of Hayagrīva's neighing horse-head. This is the work of a hand trained to wield a Chinese brush charged with ink, selecting the precise amount of pressure to emphasize the curve of the horse's jaw, mane, and flaring nostrils. No wonder this painting appeals to those who see eastern India, Nepal, Tibet, Kashmir, and Central Asia in it. None of the observations are wrong, though the underlying brushwork able to synthesize them is comfortably Chinese.

This granular level of observation, revealing both the distinct parts, their visual structure, and the synthesizing process, are really only visible from observation of the actual objects. In this case, I am very grateful to Debreczeny and the Rubin Museum for the chance to see this work and so many others. The catalog, as the record of the exhibition, does not try to present the results of such close looking, of which Debreczeny, in particular, is well equipped. Rather, the catalog uses the art to illustrate larger, functional patterns in the deployment

¹ Jetsün Dragpa Gyaltsen (2015:115).

of works of Tibetan and Tibetan-inspired art for different ritual, religious, political, and "magical warfare" ends. It is perhaps churlish or ungrateful to point out that this comes at the price of a lost opportunity when it succeeds so brilliantly in the aims it sets for itself.

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